

Tracy Scott and her husband, Blaine, founded Steadfast Steeds to help people improve their communication skills in their careers and family life.



COURTESY STEADFAST STEEDS

#### HORSES & PEOPLE

## Herd Lessons

In western Colorado, Mustangs are being used to help people enhance their skills in the workplace.

By **KATIE NAVARRA**

**I**F YOU'RE A FAN of roller coasters, drive to the Colorado National Monument. A narrow road, barely wide enough for two cars, follows zigzagging switchbacks flanked by towering, red rock sandstone on the western slope of Colorado. At its highest point—7,000 feet—the land levels out into a mesa as flat as the formations are jagged.

Nestled behind Colorado National Monument, Glade Park sits 30 minutes from grocery stores or other amenities, but there is promise of finding life-altering moments through a powerful connection to the wild horses that inhabit the remote area. From atop the

plateau in Glade Park you can just make out Little Book Cliffs Mountain, a boundary line to a wild horse management area where bands of 90 to 150 wild horses live on 39,000 acres.

Here, Tracy and Blaine Scott, founders of Steadfast Steeds, are partnering with Mustangs in work called equine-assisted learning. Originally from Cheyenne, Wyoming, the couple first moved to the area in 2005 because the United Methodist Church had posted Reverend Blaine to a church in Grand Junction.

In 2010, after a 23-plus-year career as full-time clergy, he transitioned to serving as a chaplain, and the couple

moved to Glade Park to create a sanctuary where people could live their best unbridled lives through guided interactions with the Mustangs.

There is no therapeutic riding or horsemanship instruction. Instead, equine-assisted coaching uses horse-human interactions to help individuals better understand their behaviors and communication styles. A series of in-hand activities with the horses combined with debriefing sessions tie “aha” moments directly to challenges in a person's interactions with peers, colleagues and even family.

“Gentled and socialized Mustangs keep their heightened senses from their experiences and family lineage in the wilderness,” Blaine explains. “Most foals are born in the middle of the night and walk miles at dawn to safety with their extended family band.”

Wild horses quickly learn what a threat is and where to find protection. The experienced mother raises her foal to adapt to an ever-changing environment and remain secure within the herd. The dynamics are established by a lead mare, who nurtures and leads the horses to food and safety; the lead stallion, whose role is protection and procreation; and the harem of mares, who mentor the young ones.

“Every part of a Mustang is [like] a Wi-Fi hotspot device, receiving all kinds of information every moment while sending an instant response to what the person is feeling and thinking,” Blaine says. “That makes them great crap detectors when a person is inconsistent in their actions and communications.”

In a coaching session, activities are chosen to parallel how people interact by understanding how horses use healthy herd dynamics. For example, “Tied” helps participants visualize the challenge of coordinating activities. Two horses with halters and lead ropes join in. All participants hold a section of the lead rope. The group is signaled to begin moving from a start line to a finish line. If anyone (horses included) surges ahead or trails behind, the entire group has to begin again. The purpose is to challenge participants with difficult tasks so they can see responses

to pressure. Clients see how what happens in the arena also happens in life, whether it's leading in the family, at the office or in civic service.

### WHY MUSTANGS?

All horses provide immediate and unbiased feedback to the people around them. How a horse responds to an individual speaks volumes about the way a person shows up at that moment and how that impacts professional and personal relationships.

"One of the reasons that Mustangs are so brilliant in life coaching is because they have a heightened sense of what we call multi-sensory awareness [MSA]," Blaine explains. "This is when one is mindful of the energy within themselves while at the same time observing the energy of others. Mustangs survive on being in tune with the cues from other herd members to know when it is safe or dangerous."

After a moment passes, horses don't waste time or energy on the drama. They get back to grazing rather than harboring tension and resentment like humans do. At Steadfast Steeds, the horses have free will to participate, or not. During workshops Tracy and Blaine spend a few minutes milling with the herd, looking for a horse showing interest in participating in activities. For example, coming to the gate to investigate is one clue that shows an interest. If a horse turns and walks away, it is left in the paddock. Depending on how long the event is, a horse may later show an interest and become a part of the activities.

### MUSTANG MAGIC

Deborah Pierson has offered equine therapy sessions for 10 years. The executive director of Equine Therapeutic Connections in Albuquerque, New Mexico, she has used Morgans,

Arabians, stock horses and drafts, but believes adding Mustangs to her practice will enhance learning sessions.

"Domestic horses have amazing senses but have never had to use them to survive" she says. "The Mustangs always were aware of their surroundings and what was in it to survive. The clients will have to be aware of their own internal feelings and be congruent before the Mustangs will accept them as a partner."

Last May, Pierson attended an Equine Experimental Education Association (E3A) certification course at Steadfast Steeds. The five-day event brought facilitators together from around the United States. Before the week was up, Pierson knew she was going to adopt a buckskin named Sage. He was separated from his dam at 5 months old when he was gathered from the wild and was socialized in a prison inmate program before arriving at Steadfast



## AMAZING RESULTS

### BUILDING STRONGER BONE

as seen in these x-rays

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LMT, CMLDT



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Steeds, where he has been learning the ropes of equine-assisted coaching.

"Sage has a huge play drive that will benefit clients," Pierson says. "He needs to be reminded about boundaries, what is appropriate. Many clients have big problems with boundaries, so he will be a good teacher. If the clients can set a boundary with a wild Mustang,

everything else would seem simple."

Equine-assisted learning gives older horses of any breed a purpose without the strain of riding. Mustangs, however, bring extra magic to the experience through their capacity to illustrate how to utilize unique strengths for the benefit and survival of an entire group. **WH**

## Plight of Mustangs

American Mustangs are hard-wired for survival in harsh desert environments where they may graze up to 17 hours daily to get enough nutrition. A Mustang's metabolism has developed through generations of "survival of the fittest." In the 10 western U.S. states, these small, hearty horses often drink deeply at a water hole once per day and may travel 20 miles while grazing before finding the next available water source.

Cooperation is a matter of survival rather than being well-trained to behave around other horses. Family bands consist of three to nine horses, including a lead mare and lead stallion. Every breathing moment, wild horses are individually and relationally focused on safety of self and herd.

As free-roaming prey animals, Mustangs are not territorial and, around age 3, a colt leaves its family band to join other bachelors to grow stronger by playing and sparring with one another. One day the bachelors will be strong and mature enough to earn a relationship with a mare and start a family together.

The Bureau of Land Management estimates that it manages about 95,114 wild horses and burros in the western United States. About 60 percent of them live at government-managed holding facilities. Annual roundups gather what the government determines as "excess" herd members off the land and bring them to crowded holding pens, where it can cost as much as \$50,000 to maintain a single horse throughout its life. In 2020 alone it cost \$91.2 million to feed horses living in holding pens.

Managing wild horses is tricky. They're not wildlife so people don't purchase licenses and hunt them in order to help control the population. They're not livestock because they're not raised and eaten. That puts decisions about their care in a tenuous position.

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